Journal of World Religions and Interfaith Harmony (JWRIH)
Volume 5, Issue 2 (2026) | ISSN (Print): 2958-9932 (Online): 2958-9940
Publisher: Department of World Religions and Interfaith Harmony, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

OPEN ACCESS | ARTICLE
https://journals.iub.edu.pk/index.php/jwrih
https://journals.iub.edu.pk/index.php/jwrih/issue/view/333

Ḥatm al-qulūb: Cardiac Hermeneutics and the Affective Healing of Media Consumption in Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt

Abiola Muideen Lateef https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4825-2042

Department of Islamic Studies, Federal University of Kashere, Gombe, Nigeria, ibnlateefi@fukashere.edu.ng

ARTICLE HISTORY: Received: 17 September 2026 | Accepted: 01 October 2026 | Published: 04 October 2026

HOW TO CITE: Abiola Muideen Lateef. (2026). Ḥatm al-qulūb: Cardiac Hermeneutics and the Affective Healing of Media Consumption in Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt. *Journal of World Religions and Interfaith Harmony*, 5(2), 75–86.
https://journals.iub.edu.pk/index.php/jwrih/article/view/4869

Open Access: This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, adaptation, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are properly credited.

INDEXED / HARVESTED IN: HEC Pakistan • Google Scholar • Internet Archive • Academia.edu • DefinePK • BASE • Wiki Data • OpenAlex • Research Bib

ABSTRACT

Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt (Qurʾan 49) explicates various states of heart (qalb) such as its state of health and sickness and the process of tazkiyah that restores it. This provides the framework for navigating how media environments could wound or potentially heal human consciousness. Drawing on classical tafsīr, Sufi psychology, affect theory, and even neurocardiology, this paper traces how key themes of the sūrah like verification (tabayyun), lowering the voice (khafḍ al-ṣawt), suspicion (ẓann), and backbiting (ghībah) can map onto our struggles with social media, algorithmic curation, and information overload. It is argued that ḥatm al-qulūb, the sealing of hearts, need not be read as a static divine punishment. Instead, it functions as a dynamic, self-reinforcing process of affective hardening which is gradually produced by repeated media consumption patterns. Consequently, digital environments are also capable of closing us off from truth, beauty, and ethical discernment. However, the sūrah provides a healing that transcends digital detoxes and standard media literacy programmes by offering some positive prescriptions such as testing of the heart for taqwā, making faith beloved within it and orienting it toward reconciliation. Thus, there is need for cardiac media literacy, such that weaves together Islamic contemplative practice, Qurʾanic hermeneutical discipline, and critical media theory.

Keywords: *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt, cardiac hermeneutics, media consumption, affect theory, heart-centered interpretation, digital ethics, tazkiyah, tabayyun, Qurʾanic psychology*.

1. Introduction

Never before has the human heart attracted so much scientific, commercial, and existential attention simultaneously. Neurocardiologists now tell us that the heart operates as a cognitive organ in its "intrinsic cardiac nervous system," a "little brain" of roughly 40,000 neurons, processes information independently and communicates with the cranial brain through intricate bidirectional pathways.[1] Meanwhile, affective neuroscience

[1] John A. Armour, "Potential Clinical Relevance of the 'Little Brain' on the Mammalian Heart," Experimental Physiology 93, no. 2 (2008): 165–76, https://doi.org/10.1113/expphysiol.2007.041178; Rollin McCraty et al., "The Coherent Heart: Heart-Brain Interactions, Psychophysiological Coherence, and the Emergence of System-Wide Order," Integral Review 5, no. 2 (2009): 10–115.

has demonstrated how emotions are embodied, thereby circulating between individuals and environments in ways that reshape perception, judgment, and social organisation.[2] Consequently, these insights have been weaponised with frightening sophistication in digital media industries through platforms that not only capture attention or modulate emotion, but also monetise affective engagement at industrial scale.[3]

It is however, established that many people consider the heart merely a metaphoric poetic leftover from premodern thought, which through neuroscience, has developed into mapping of mind onto brain. Yet, I want to argue that this dismissal is premature, and that it carries political consequences we rarely acknowledge. The Islamic tradition, as particularly embedded in *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt*, offers what I call a cardiac hermeneutics framework. Cardiac hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation which is centred on the *qalb* as the locus of perception, ethical discernment, and spiritual transformation. This framework is not only compatible with neurocardiology and affect theory but also enriches them in ways I find genuinely surprising. More urgently, it gives us resources for confronting the affective crisis of contemporary media consumption such as the epidemic of anxiety, depression, fragmented attention, and ethical numbness we often find in algorithmically curated information environments.

Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt, the 49th chapter, occupies a distinctive place in the Qurʾanic canon. Revealed in the late Medinan period (c. 9 AH), it addresses the social and ethical formation of the Muslim community with a unique focus on speech, suspicion, and the heart-states that make for a possibility or otherwise of ethical community.[4] Its eighteen verses contain, in effect, a comprehensive cardiac psychology, having analyzed how the heart becomes sealed (*ḥatm*), diseased (*marīḍ*), or purified (*mutahhar*), and how these states are produced and reproduced through what we say, how we listen, whether we verify, and how we judge. *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* has been able to demonstrate a remarkably sophisticated grasp of how information flows alter human consciousness and community through the famous command to verify news (*fatabayyanū*, 49:6), the prohibitions against mockery, defamation, and backbiting (49:11–12), and the distinction between outward submission (*islām*) and inward faith (*īmān*) that penetrates the heart (49:14).

What follows brings *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* into conversation with three contemporary fields. The first is affect theory which draws extensively from Sara Ahmed's "affective economies" and the circulation of emotion through material and digital environments. The second field is media studies which consist in critical approaches to algorithmic curation, platform capitalism, and the political economy of attention. Third, the chapter interacts with neurocardiological field which pertains research on the heart-brain connection, heart rate variability, and the physiology of emotional states. While rooted in the Qurʾanic tradition, the cardiac hermeneutics developed here invites comparative engagement with similar concepts in Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist thought which can contribute to an emerging interfaith conversation on digital ethics. These concepts include the *cardia* of patristic theology, the *lev* of rabbinic anthropology, and the *citta* of Buddhist psychology. My aim is not to reduce the Qurʾanic text to a source of scientific validation, nor to use it as instrument for media literacy programmes. Rather, I want to show that the sūrah offers a genuinely alternative epistemology, which not only integrates what modernity has fragmented into psychology, neuroscience, ethics, and spirituality but also demonstrates that this integration is capable of addressing the root causes of media-induced distress.

The argument unfolds across seven sections. Section two lays out the conceptual foundations of cardiac hermeneutics by tracing the Qurʾanic understanding of the heart as an organ of perception and interpretation. Section three reads *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* as a cardiac text, paying attention to its vocabulary of heart-states and its social psychology of information. The affective economy of contemporary digital media through Ahmed's theory and recent neurocognitive research are mapped in section four. Section five diagnoses the cardiac pathology of algorithmic consumption, thereby developing *ḥatm al-qulūb* as a dynamic, self-reinforcing process of affective hardening. Further, section six explores the sūrah's therapeutic prescriptions. Cardiac media literacy is proposed as a practical framework in section seven. The paper concludes with broader implications for Qurʾanic hermeneutics, media ethics, and the decolonisation of affect.

---

[2] Sara Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 4; Margaret Wetherell, Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding (London: SAGE Publications, 2012), 11.

[3] Shoshana Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 8; Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 4.

[4] Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm, ed. M. Ḥ. Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2000), 7:327; Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Qurṭubī, Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, ed. ʿA. ʿA. ʿAbd al-Mawjūd and ʿA. M. Muʿawwaḍ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2006), 16:305.

2. Conceptual Foundation of Cardiac Hermeneutics

2.1 The Qalb in Qurʾanic Epistemology

The Arabic qalb derives from q-l-b which means to turn, overturn, flip, change. Etymologically, the heart is what turns either toward truth or falsehood, either toward God or away, and either toward compassion or hardness.5 This dynamic, directional quality is central to the Qurʾanic imagination. The heart is seen as an active, perceptive, transformative organ rather than a static container of emotion. In the Qurʾan, the word, qalb appears over 130 times, typically in contexts that lay emphasis on its cognitive, moral, and spiritual functions.

Remarkably, the Qurʾan assigns to the heart functions that modernity ordinarily reserves for brain or mind. These functions include: perception (idrāk), understanding (fahm), reasoning (ʿaql), remembrance (dhikr), and faith (īmān). For example, the verse, qulūbun yaʿqilūna bihā "They have hearts with which they do not understand" (Qurʾan 7:179) identifies the heart as the locus of reason, discernment and wisdom (ʿaql).6 Also, the verse, "Have they not travelled through the land, so that their hearts may thus learn wisdom?" (Qurʾan 22:46) makes the heart the organ of experiential learning and moral insight. Thus, the Qurʾanic epistemology is fundamentally cardiac. That is to say, knowledge is not merely propositional but transformative; that which is operating at the level of the heart's orientation and capacity.

Recent Qurʾanic studies have emphasised this cognitive dimension. One study argues that "the heart represents the pineal muscle created by Almighty God in the cavity of the son of Adam and is an instrument for acquiring knowledge," noting that "all mental functions such as reason, thinking, meditation, looking, hope, and others are never attributed to one side, the heart" in the Qurʾanic text, but rather the heart is presented as the integrated locus of consciousness.7 This "Qurʾanic epistemological miracle of the heart" challenges the modern separation of mind and heart. Instead, it proposes a unified organ of perception thereby encompassing what neuroscience now distributes across brain regions.

The Qurʾan also describes pathological states of the heart in many passages with direct hermeneutical significance. The "sealed heart" (qalb maḥrūn or qalb muṭbaʿ) is closed to divine guidance and ethical perception. The "hard heart" (qaswah) is insensitive to truth and suffering. The "rusty heart" (ran) is obscured by sin and neglect. The "diseased heart" (marīḍ) is distorted in perception and judgment. Lastly, the "receptive heart" (qaʿb) is open to truth and transformation.8 These are not mere metaphors. They are understood as real conditions affecting the heart's capacity to interpret, understand, and respond to reality. Hermeneutics, otherwise known as the art and science of interpretation, is thus, in the Qurʾanic framework, fundamentally a cardiac activity. It depends on the state of the heart.

2.2 Hermeneutics of the Heart in the Classical Tafsīr

Classical Qurʾanic exegesis developed sophisticated interpretive methods that recognised state of heart of the interpreter as a genuine variable in the hermeneutical process. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), in his Jāmiʿ al-Bayān, grounded interpretation in the Arabic language, the Prophet's practice (sunnah), and community consensus (ijmāʿ), yet he also acknowledged that the depth of understanding depends on the interpreter's spiritual and moral preparation.9 The principle of tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-l-Qurʾān (the Qurʾan explains itself) which was articulated by Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) and developed by later scholars such as Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī (d. 1930), assumes that

[5] Toshihiko Izutsu, God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 112.

[6] I. J. Boullata, Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qurʾan (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1990), 149.

[7] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 88.

[8] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 88.

[9] Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl Āy al-Qurʾān, ed. ʿA. M. Muʿawwaḍ and ʿA. ʿA. ʿAbd al-Mawjūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2001), 22:305.

a heart is capable of perceiving interconnections between verses, a capacity that is not merely intellectual but spiritual.10

Sufi hermeneutics elaborated this cardiac dimension further. For exegetes such as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896) and Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), the heart is the "eye of the Real" (ʿayn al-ḥaqq), that is, the mirror in which divine truths are reflected. The purification of the heart (tazkiyat al-qalb) is a prerequisite for deep interpretation. One cannot access inner meanings (bāṭin) of the Qurʾan until one's own inner being has been cleared of obstacles that block divine light.11 This Sufi interpretation is neither arbitrary nor subjective. It only recognises that the text possesses depths that are accessible only to hearts that are already prepared through spiritual discipline.

The Qurʾan states that "it is only those who have knowledge among His servants who fear Allah" […who have Taqwā] (Qurʾan 35:28). Taqwā is more precisely understood as the heart's vigilant awareness of God's presence. The Qurʾanic verse establishes a connection between knowledge (ʿilm) and taqwā and, that is not merely moralistic but epistemological. Taqwā opens the heart to deeper understanding, while its absence closes the heart to truth. The implications for media consumption are profound because the state of the heart in terms of awareness or heedlessness directly affects its capacity to interpret and respond to the information it receives.

2.3 A Working Definition for Cardiac Hermeneutics

Drawing on these foundations, I propose cardiac hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation that takes the heart as its central category. Five features define it.

First, interpretation is understood as embodied and affective exercise, not merely cognitive. The heart integrates cognition, emotion, and moral cum spiritual perception. In other words, interpretation is never neutral or purely intellectual. It is always shaped by the interpreter's emotional state, moral orientation, and spiritual condition.

Second, the heart can be healthy or diseased, receptive or sealed, and these states earnestly affect interpretive capacity. A diseased heart interprets texts, and even the world, in ways that confirm its own distortions. But a healthy heart remains open to being transformed by what it encounters.

Third, cardiac hermeneutics attends to the social and environmental dimensions of the states of heart. The heart does not exist in isolation; it is shaped by the information it receives, the relationships it inhabits, and the practices it engages. Cardiac hermeneutics is thus inseparable from social ethics and environmental design.

Fourth, it includes a therapeutic dimension. If interpretation depends on the state of heart, then cultivating interpretive capacity requires healing and purifying the heart. Cardiac hermeneutics is not merely descriptive but prescriptive, offering practices aimed at restoring the health of heart.

Fifth, cardiac hermeneutics is teleological, that is, oriented toward the heart's ultimate purpose which is knowledge of the Real (al-Ḥaqq), ethical flourishing, and spiritual proximity to God. Interpretation is therefore, not an end in itself but a means of heart-transformation.

3. A Cardiac Reading of Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt

3.1 The Sūrah's Structure and Cardiac Architecture

Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt's eighteen verses follow a carefully structured progression from the etiquette of divine presence through the ethics of social interaction to the inner states of the heart. The sūrah opens with commands to believers not to advance before Allah and His Messenger (49:1), not to raise their voices above the Prophet's (49:2), and not to call out to him from outside his private chambers (49:4). These establish a hierarchy of presence and attention. The heart of a believer must be oriented toward the divine and prophetic presence before it can properly engage the social world.

Then the sūrah moves to an explicitly cardiac section on information ethics (49:6–12), starting with the command to verify news brought by a *fāsiq* and proceeding through prohibitions against mockery, defamation, offensive nicknames, excessive suspicion, spying, and backbiting. It is captured in the famous verse 49:12:

> "O believers! Avoid much suspicion, for indeed some suspicion is sin. And do not spy, nor backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would despise it."

This addresses not merely outward behaviour but the states of heart that produce harmful speech and social discord.

The sūrah concludes with verses on the nature of true faith (49:14–18), by distinguishing between outward submission (*Islām*) and inward faith (*Imān*) that penetrates the heart. This final section returns us to the cardiac

[10] W. A. Saleh, The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qurʾān Commentary of al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035) (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 48.

[11] William C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 106.

centre. All the social ethics of the middle section are grounded in the state of heart. Without *Īmān* in the heart, external behaviours are hollow. With *īmān*, they flow naturally from transformed inner being.

The Heart Tested for Taqwā (49:3)

The first explicit reference to the heart is contained in verse 3 of the surah. It says:

> "Indeed, those who lower their voices before the Messenger of Allah they are the ones, whose hearts Allah has tested (*ibtalā*) for *taqwā*. For them is forgiveness and a great reward."

The verb *ibtalā* (tested/tried) here suggests that *Taqwā* is not a natural state but one that is cultivated through trial and discipline. The heart is tested, refined, and proven through the practice of lowering the voice, and of restraining the impulse to speak, assert, and demand attention.

Classical exegetes emphasise the connection between this verse and the preceding command not to raise voices above the Prophet's. Ibn Kathīr narrates that this verse was revealed regarding Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, who spoke loudly in the Prophet's presence, and that it establishes a standard of reverence reflecting the heart's inner state.[12] Al-Qurṭubī adds that lowering the voice is a sign of humility (*khuḍūʿ*) and that the heart tested for *taqwā* is the one emptied of arrogance and filled with awareness of God's presence.[13]

Consequently, this verse establishes that a foundational principle of the heart's capacity for ethical perception and action depends on its being tested and refined through practices of restraint. In the context of media consumption, this means the heart's health depends not merely on what information it receives but on how it receives it, whether with humility, patience, and *taqwā*, or with haste, arrogance, and impulsive reaction.

Verification and the Disciplined Heart (49:6–8)

The most explicit statement on information ethics is captured in verses 6–8 of the surah which reads:

> "O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one (*fāsiq*) with information, investigate (*fatabayyanū*), lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful."

In the well-documented occasion of revelation (*sababul-nuzūl)*, al-Walīd ibn ʿUqbah was sent to collect zakāt from Banū al-Muṣṭaliq, but became afraid due to a past tribal feud, and returned, thereby falsely reporting that the tribe had apostatised. On hearing this, the Prophet was about to send a punitive expedition when this verse was revealed. He was commanded to verify before taking any action.[14]

Beyond this historical context, the verse establishes a cardiac discipline that the heart must not immediately assent to information that aligns with its fears, prejudices, or desires. The command *fatabayyanū* requires an active, deliberative process that resists the immediate affective pull of sensational news. The unreliable source, epitomised in *fāsiq,* is defined not merely by falsehood but by moral character: he is *fāsiq* because his heart is corrupted, and his corruption affects the information he transmits.

The algorithms which curate information by engagement metrics rather than truth, amplifies emotionally charged content, and creates filter bubbles that confirm existing biases function as *fāsiq* sources in our digital age. The command to verify takes on renewed urgency. The heart that does not verify is easily manipulated, thereby harming others through ignorance and regretting its actions later. The consequences of unverified sharing on social media, where rumours and misinformation have produced real-world violence, discrimination, and social breakdown are preempted in the Qur'anic warning: "lest you harm a people out of ignorance."

The Social Diseases of the Heart (49:11–12)

The social dimensions of cardiac pathology are earnestly treated in verses 11–12 of the surah, thus:

There are a lot of prohibitions in these verses. Each prohibition addresses a specific disease of the heart that can be manifested in harmful speech. For instance, mockery (*sukhrīyah*) emanates from arrogance (*kibr*) and the heart's desire to elevate itself by demeaning others. While defamation (*lamz*) and offensive nicknames (*tanābuz*) come from bearing malice and the desire to wound others, suspicion (*ẓann*) arises from anxiety, distrust, the heart's projection of its own darkness onto others. In addition, spying (*tajassus*) is borne out of curiosity without boundaries, such that the heart is propelled by intrusive desire to know what God has concealed. Lastly, the heart's failure to recognise the sanctity of the believer constitute backbiting (*ghībah*).

Al-Ghazālī noted that the image of eating the flesh of one's dead brother is one of the Qurʾan's most powerful psychological interventions.[15] This imagery portends a visceral disgust, which is capable of creating an affective aversion that is operating below conscious deliberation. With this cardiac pedagogy, it is understood that the heart's emotional response to backbiting is transformed, thereby making it as instinctively repulsive as cannibalism.

---

[12] Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm, 7:341.

[13] al-Qurṭubī, Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, 16:312.

[14] Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm, 7:348

[15] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, ed. M. ʿA. al-Saqqā (Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyyah, 1967), 3:141.

The formats such as comment section, the quote-tweet, the reply thread are designed to elicit immediate, unfiltered emotional reactions that often take the form of ridicule, accusation, or character assassination. Therefore, these verses address the affective economy of digital platforms, where mockery, defamation, suspicion, and backbiting have become structurally incentivised. The prohibitions in the surah are thus, the precise diagnoses of the cardiac pathologies that are often cultivated and exploited by digital environments.

The Penetration of Faith into the Heart (49:14–18)

The final section of the sūrah addresses the distinction between outward submission (Islām) and inward faith (Īmān): "The Bedouins say, 'We believe.' Say, 'You have not believed; but say, "We have submitted," for faith has not yet entered your hearts'" (49:14). Scholars have debated whether this indicates a permanent distinction between *Islām* and *Īmān* or a developmental progression from outward to inward commitment.[16]

What matters for our purposes here is the emphasis of the sūrah on the heart as the locus of authentic faith. It is insufficient to consider mere verbal profession or outward compliance as belief. The faith must penetrate (*yadkhul*) the heart, and transform it from within. This penetration is a process that ranges from a gradual opening, softening to illumination through the agency of sustained practice, community, and divine grace. In essence, the heart penetrated by faith loves what God loves, hates what God hates, and perceives reality through the lens of divine mercy and justice.

The concluding verses (49:15–18) of the sūrah describe true believers, thus:

> "The believers are only those who have believed in Allah and His Messenger and then doubt not but strive with their properties and their lives in the cause of Allah. It is those who are the truthful."

When the heart is fully transformed, it becomes, not passively receptive but, actively committed to truth and justice. Thus, the cardiac hermeneutics of *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* eventually envision the heart as not only the engine of ethical action, but also the source of courage, generosity, and determination.

4. The Affective Economy of Digital Media

4.1 The Circulation of Emotion in Affective Economies

The theory of affective economies by Sara Ahmed gives us a critical lens for understanding how emotions circulate through social and digital environments. In her argument, Ahmed states that emotions are not private, internal experiences but social and material phenomena that have, over time, attached to particular objects, bodies, and signs, thereby creating networks of attachment and aversion which now determine how collective life should be organised.[17] "Affects," she writes, "are not simply 'within' nor 'without' but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds."[18] This framework is relevant to, and can be applied to social media. The visual aesthetics, algorithms, and user interactions in social media typically create affective economies which shaping how people feel, perceive, and relate to one another.

Recent scholarship has broadened this framework by analysing how platforms deliberately engineer affective engagement. A 2025 study argues that "Sara Ahmed's (2004) theory of affective economies is crucial to understanding how social media aesthetics become charged with affects," noting that "affects 'stick' to particular objects, people, and bodies, enabling emotions to circulate and organise collective attachments."[19] The effort exerted in aligning with an aesthetic narrarive through posts, mood boards, or daily rituals imbues it with affective weight. The reiteration of this aesthetics materialises emotions that create shared sensibilities and relational intensities.

The corollary of this is that digital platforms are not neutral channels for information transmission but active architects of affective environments. They do not merely host content; they curate, amplify, and monetise emotional responses. The like, the share, the comment, the retweet are mechanisms of affective circulation that train users to produce and consume emotion in particular ways.

4.2 Neurocognitive Dimensions of Media Consumption

Neurocognitive research has documented the physiological dimensions of this affective economy with striking precision. Satani et al. who conducted an EEG study of 100 participants, found that social media use causes marked alterations in brainwave activity. The results showed that alpha waves decline during engagement (especially with emotionally charged content), beta and gamma waves heighten during active interaction, and

[16] Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm, 7:360; al-Qurṭubī, Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān, 16:333.
[17] Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion, 45.
[18] Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion, 117.
[19] Ahmed, Cultural Politics of Emotion, 120.

theta and delta waves increase during passive surfing or extended use.[20] The study concluded that social media engages brain reward pathways which are similar to addictive behaviour, with extended beta and gamma activity potentially interfering with emotional regulation and attention.

The research also found that platforms employ variable reward systems which stimulate dopamine release through likes and comments, thereby engaging the ventral striatum. High-reward moments were associated with elevated gamma wave activity as compared to neutral content. "Infinite scrolling" interfaces have been linked to weakened inhibitory control in the prefrontal cortex, resulting in sustained beta wave activity that makes disengagement harder.[21] Other longitudinal research indicates that heavy daily use correlates with reduced prefrontal impulse control and accumulating cognitive fatigue, manifesting in increased delta activity and delayed alpha recovery.[22]

These findings carry profound implications for cardiac hermeneutics. If the heart-brain system is being rewired by digital consumption; if sustained beta and gamma activity interferes with emotional regulation; if alpha recovery is delayed; if delta activity indicates cognitive fatigue; then, the heart's capacity for *taqwā*, for patient verification, for resisting suspicion and backbiting, is systematically undermined. The "diseases of the heart" identified by *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* are not just moral failings but neurophysiological conditions produced by the media environments in which we live.

4.3 The Political Economy of Affective Capture

The affective economy of digital media is not merely psychological or neurocognitive; it is political-economic. "Surveillance capitalism" and "data colonialism" of Shoshana Zuboff and Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias respectively have demonstrated how the extraction of personal data has become a primary driver of capitalist accumulation in the digital age.[23] Platforms do not just capture attention; they capture the body's responses, emotional states, and relational patterns, then convert them into predictive products sold to advertisers and other actors.[24]

This is political economy and has specific consequences for the heart. The affective data extracted from users in terms of heart rate variability, facial expressions, scrolling patterns, and dwell time on particular content, feeds back into algorithmic curation, which, in effect, create personalised affective environments, designed to maximise engagement. The result is what I call "affective capture." Affective capture is the systematic harvesting and modulation of emotional life for commercial and political ends. The heart, in this system, is actively exploited such that its natural rhythms of attention, rest, and reflection are disrupted by the constant demand for engagement.

5. Ḥatm al-qulūb (The Sealing of Hearts) in the Algorithmic Age

There has been a heated theological debate about divine justice and human responsibility stemming from (mis)understanding of verses such as "Allah has set a seal upon their hearts and upon their hearing" (Qurʾan 2:7). The Qurʾanic concept of the "sealed heart" (*qalb maḫrūn* or *qalb muṭbaʿ*) is often read as a divine punishment. By extension, God has sealed the hearts of those who persistently reject truth, thus rendering them incapable of guidance.

But *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* suggests something more dynamic and process- following. The sūrah does not describe God as sealing hearts arbitrarily. Rather, it describes hearts being tested, purified, or hardened through social practices; through how people speak, listen, verify or judge. The hearts of the Bedouins of verse 14 have not yet been penetrated by faith; not because God has sealed them, but because their social practices, their haste to claim status, their failure to verify, have prevented the opening. Read this way, heart-sealing is not a static divine act but a cumulative, self-reinforcing process produced by repeated patterns of affective engagement.

In the context of algorithmic media consumption, the word, *ḥatm al-qulūb* (the sealing of hearts) is used to describe this process. Thus, *ḥatm al-qulūb* is the progressive hardening, closing, and de-sensitisation of the heart as a result of sustained engagement with digital environments which have been designed to maximise affective arousal, minimise reflective pause, and exploit cognitive biases. This is not a punishment imposed from without but a condition produced from within through the repeated exposure of the heart to unverified information, sensational content, social comparison, and affective manipulation. *Ḥatm al-qulūb* operates through several interconnected mechanisms.

---

[20] A. Satani et al., "Modern Day High: The Neurocognitive Impact of Social Media Usage," Cureus 17, no. 7 (2025): e87496, http://doi:10.7759/cureus.87496.

[21] Satani et al., "Modern Day High," 2.

[22] Satani et al., "Modern Day High," 2.

[23] Zuboff, Age of Surveillance Capitalism, 16.

[24] Couldry and Mejias, Costs of Connection, 189.

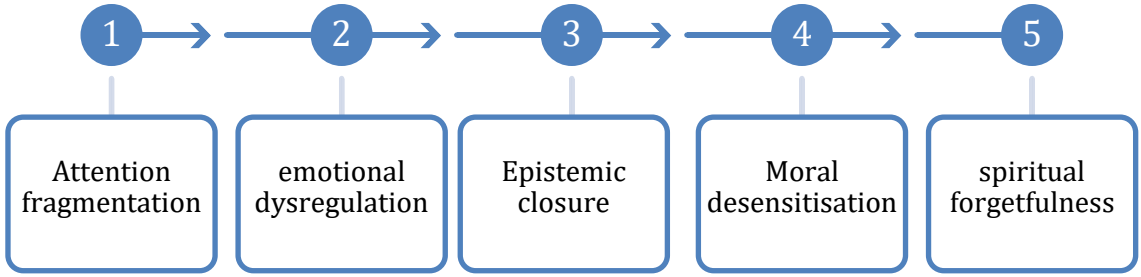


Fig.1: Mechanisms of affective hardening

Attention fragmentation comes first. The constant switching between platforms, the infinite scroll, and the autoplay video train the heart to flit from stimulus to stimulus without sustained attention. In the process, the capacity for *muraqabah* (contemplative vigilance) and patient dwelling with a text or a person, is progressively eroded. The heart eventually becomes unable to hold attention long enough for truth to penetrate.

Then there is emotional dysregulation. The algorithmic amplification of outrage, fear, and envy creates a heart that is chronically agitated, reactive or defensive. This dysregulation is documented physiologically in the neurocognitive research on beta and gamma wave elevation, delayed alpha recovery, and prefrontal impairment. A heart in chronic agitation cannot perceive subtlety, nuance, or divine guidance; it can only react.

Epistemic closure follows. The filter bubble and echo chamber effects of algorithmic curation create hearts that is exposed only to confirming information, reinforcing existing prejudices and closing off alternative perspectives. And when the heart is immersed in an environment that systematically prevents encounter with disconfirming evidence, the command *fatabayyanū* becomes impossible.

Moral desensitisation comes next. When this happens, mockery, backbiting, and character assassination are normalized in digital discourse. Gradually, it hardens the heart to the suffering of others. The heart is repeatedly exposed to, nay, encouraged to participate in digital forms of *ghībah*. In consequence, the visceral disgust that the Qurʾan seeks to cultivate toward backbiting is progressively attenuated.

Finally, there is spiritual forgetfulness (*ghaflah*). This is caused by constant stream of notifications, updates, distractions which makes the heart perpetually occupied with the immediate, the trivial and the ephemeral. The endless demand for digital engagement has crowded out the remembrance of God (*dhikr*).

From the perspective of cardiac hermeneutics, the "reader" of digital media is a cardiac being whose interpretive capacity is shaped by the platform's affective economy. The capacity of the heart to interpret, to perceive truth, to discern beauty, and to recognise the divine is systematically degraded by the environments in which it is immersed. And this has profound implications for how we understand media literacy. Though, conventional programmes focus on cognitive skills such as identifying bias, checking sources, and recognising propaganda, it is insufficient. If the heart is sealed; that is, chronically agitated, morally desensitised, spiritually forgetful; then, cognitive skills alone cannot restore its capacity for true interpretation. Hence, there is need for a cardiac intervention: a healing of the heart that restores its receptivity, patience, moral sensitivity, and spiritual awareness.

6. Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt's Therapeutic Prescriptions for the Affective Healing of Media Consumption

6.1 The Practice of Contemplative Restraint

The practice of contemplative restraint is well-established in the opening command of the surah which asks the Muslims not to raise voices above the Prophet's, but to lower them in his presence. This is directly applicable to digital consumption. "Lowering the voice" (*khafḍ al-ṣawt*) is not merely about tuning down the volume; it concerns the heart's posture of humility, patience, and receptivity. In digital parlance, this translates into the practices of resisting the impulse to immediate reaction, creating space between stimulus and response, and cultivating the capacity for silent, attentive presence.

This is corroborated by the neurocognitive research on meditation and contemplative practice which has reported that increases in alpha wave activity, heart rate variability, and prefrontal cortex function are degraded by excessive social media use.[25] The Islamic practice of *dhikr*, particularly combined with regulated breathing, has

[25] Richard J. Davidson et al., "Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation," Psychosomatic Medicine 65, no. 4 (2003): 564–70, https://doi.org/10.1097/01.PSY.0000077505.67574.E3.

been shown to produce similar effects, thereby creating a physiological state of cardiac coherence supporting emotional regulation and cognitive clarity.[26]

6.2 The Discipline of Patient Inquiry

Verification in the cardiac hermeneutical sense is not merely a cognitive procedure (checking sources, cross-referencing facts) but a cardiac discipline: the cultivation of patience, restraint, and humility in the face of information. The central prescription of the sūrah for information ethics, and which applies directly to digital media consumption is the command *fatabayyanū* (verify, investigate, ascertain).

In practice, this means several things. First, it means to resist the impulse to immediate sharing or reaction and to create a deliberate pause between coming across information and responding to it. Second, it involves cultivating scepticism not as cynicism but as *taqwā* with a vigilant awareness that information may be distorted, or that one's own heart may be biased, or that God sees what is hidden. Third, one must seek multiple perspectives, particularly those challenging one's own assumptions, as a way of preventing epistemic closure. Lastly, it entails attending to the character of the source, by recognising that unreliable sources often have affective or financial incentives that distort their reporting.

6.3 The Purification of Perception

One of the most pervasive cardiac pathologies in digital media is the tendency to interpret ambiguous information in the worst possible light in order to assume bad faith or to project one's own anxieties onto others. The sūrah warns against excessive suspicion (*ijtināb kathīr min al-ẓann*) because not all suspicion requires recognising genuine wrongdoing, but the habitual, automatic assumption of evil that poisons relationships and communities.

In essence, there is need for purification of perception. This means cultivating what classical scholars called *ḥusn al-ẓann* (positive assumption, giving the benefit of the doubt) which serves as a cardiac discipline that protect the heart from the corrosive effects of chronic negativity. It involves recognising that the tweet, the headline, the out-of-context quote may not represent the whole person or the whole truth. It also means refusing to participate in the digital witch-hunt, the pile-on, or the cancellation that has become so characteristic of online discourse.

In his *Iḥyāʾ*, Al-Ghazālī identifies suspicion as a disease of the heart arising from the soul's need to elevate itself by demeaning others, and prescribes as remedy the recognition of one's own faults, the practice of gratitude for others' good qualities, and the cultivation of compassion.[27] These are not merely moral exhortations but cardiac practices that transform the heart's perceptual habits.

6.4 The Ethics of Speech and Silence

When speaking ill of others in their absence is normalized, this is called backbiting (*ghībah*) and it constitutes the most severe cardiac pathology of digital media. The surah employs visceral imagery of eating the flesh of one's dead brother to prohibit it. In our age, where backbiting has been industrialised through comment sections, gossip blogs, and cancellation campaigns, the affective pedagogy on ethics of speech and silence is urgently needed.

The cardiac hermeneutical approach to backbiting goes beyond mere abstinence. It involves cultivating *ṣāḥib al-lisān* (mastery of the tongue) in the Sufi tradition. Rather than suppressing speech, it should be transformed into a vehicle of truth, beauty, and healing. To do this, there is need for, first, the practice of silence which recognises that much of what we are tempted to say does not need to be said. Secondly, we should practise *dhikr* by filling the heart and tongue with remembrance of God so that less space remains for harmful speech. Thirdly, we should practise *shukr* (gratitude) by focusing on the good qualities of others rather than their faults. Lastly, the *naṣīḥah* (sincere counsel) should be practiced such that if criticism is necessary, it will be offered directly, privately, and with compassion rather than publicly and with malice.

6.5 The Heart's Transformation

When faith enters the heart, it transforms the heart's loves, hates, fears, and hopes. It makes the heart love what God loves (truth, justice, mercy, beauty) and hate what God hates (falsehood, oppression, cruelty, ugliness). It orients the heart toward the eternal rather than the ephemeral, toward the Real rather than the illusory. The is the final prescription of the surah and it is the culmination of all the disciplines mentioned above.

[26] McCraty et al., "Coherent Heart," 10–115.

[27] al-Ghazālī, Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, 3:128.

This transformation means that the heart is no longer primarily oriented toward digital platforms for nourishment, stimulation, or validation. It now finds its primary nourishment in *dhikr*, finds its stimulation in contemplation, and finds its validation in divine mercy. It does not mean abandoning digital media entirely; but rather, it engages with them from a transformed heart, one that is no longer vulnerable to their affective capture.

7. A Proposed Framework for Cardiac Media Literacy

While conventional media literacy programmes train cognitive skills, these skills are necessary but insufficient for addressing the cardiac crisis of digital media. This is because, a heart that is sealed, hardened, or diseased cannot effectively deploy cognitive skills. In fact, cognitive skills may be weaponised by a corrupted heart to rationalise its own prejudices and justify its own harmful speech.

Cardiac media literacy proposes a complementary approach which addresses the state of the heart state as the foundation of interpretive capacity. It integrates cognitive skills with contemplative practices, ethical formation, and spiritual cultivation. Drawing on *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* and the broader Islamic tradition, five dimensions of cardiac media literacy have been sketched.

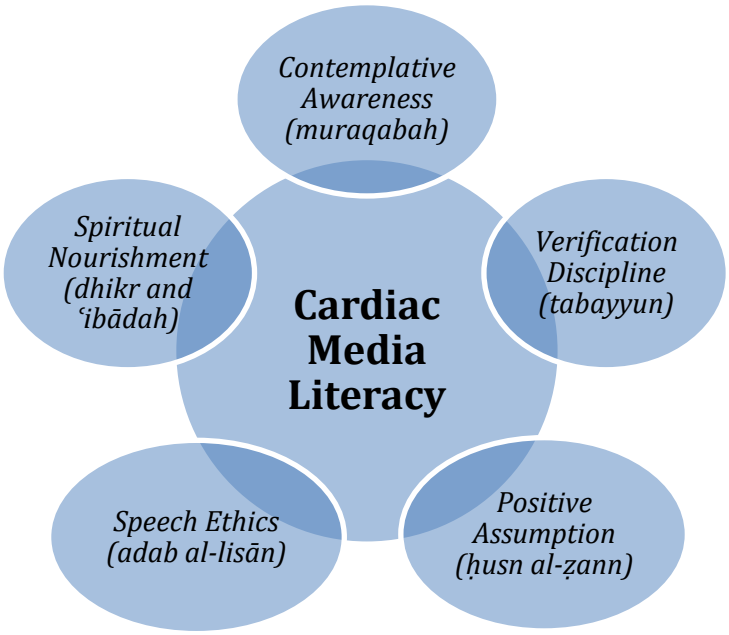


Fig. 2: Dimensions of Cardiac Media Literacy

Contemplative Awareness (*muraqabah*) cultivates the heart's capacity for sustained, non-reactive attention. The practices of this include daily periods of silence and solitude, regulated breathing combined with *dhikr,* and mindful engagement with media. They also include pausing before clicking, noticing bodily and emotional responses, and creating space between stimulus and response. The goal is to restore alpha wave activity, heart rate variability, and prefrontal cortex function degraded by excessive digital consumption.

If a person makes it a routine to use the "24-hour rule" (waiting a day before sharing or reacting to sensational news), to cross-reference the contents with diverse sources, attend to the character and incentives of sources, and recognise his own emotional triggers and cognitive biases, it will prevent his heart from being manipulated by affectively charged misinformation. This is called Verification Discipline (*tabayyun*), the ability to make the heart patient and humble in the face of information.

By Positive Assumption (*ḥusn al-ẓann*), the heart is made to interpret ambiguous information charitably. This is done by identifying the limits of digital context, seeking out the whole person behind the partial quote, and cultivating gratitude for the good qualities of those, one is tempted to criticise. In this way, the heart can be prevented from being poisoned by chronic negativity and suspicion.

The mastery of the tongue by the heart in digital spaces constitutes Speech Ethics (*adab al-lisān*) in the cardiac media literacy. Questions such as: "Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?" should be asked before posting in order to transform digital speech from a vehicle of harm to a vehicle of healing. This can be done by avoiding anonymous or pseudonymous attacks; offering criticism directly and privately rather than publicly; and using digital platforms primarily for building up rather than tearing down.

Spiritual Nourishment (*dhikr* and *ʿibādah*) ensures that the primary nourishment of the heart comes not from digital media but from divine remembrance and worship. This will create a heart so full of God to the extent

that only little space remains for the toxins of digital consumption. Daily *ṣalāh* can then serve as a technology of heart-regulation while regular *dhikr* fills the auditory and cognitive space of the heart. Periodic digital fasting (*ṣawm al-ṭāʿāt*); and annual retreat (*iʿtikāf*) are also needed for intensive heart-cultivation.

Consequently, cardiac media literacy cannot be achieved through individual effort alone; it requires institutional support and cultural change. Islamic educational institutions, right from maktab to madrasah to university, can integrate cardiac media literacy into their curricula. Mere adding a digital ethics module is not enough. They should restructure the entire educational environment around heart-cultivation by creating spaces of silence and beauty, modelling contemplative engagement with texts, with a view to forming teachers whose own hearts have been healed and purified.

Also, in an age of epidemic anxiety, depression, and attention fragmentation, the need for heart-centered approaches to media consumption goes beyond religious boundaries. The limitations recorded in neurocognitive research on social media's effects and the affective theory of digital environments, have heightened the need to address the whole person in body, mind, heart, and spirit.

Conclusion

I have argued, in the foregoing, that *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* offers a sophisticated heart-centered theory of interpretation and ethical engagement that addresses the root causes of contemporary media-induced distress. The analysis of the states of heart in the sūrah, especially its prescriptions for information ethics, and vision of the heart transformed by faith provides resources for understanding and healing the affective pathology of algorithmic media consumption.

The concept of *ḥatm al-qulūb* illuminates the mechanism by which digital environments gradually bring human beings close to truth, beauty, and ethical discernment. It is a dynamic, self-reinforcing process produced by the sustained exposure of the heart to environments which, are designed to fragment attention, dysregulate emotion, close off perspective, desensitise morality, and crowd out spiritual awareness.

We found in the sūrah positive prescriptions such as lowering the voice, verifying news, avoiding suspicion, prohibiting backbiting, opening the heart to faith which provide a comprehensive regime for affective healing. These prescriptions constitute practicable disciplines that address the neurocognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of media consumption. When integrated into cardiac media literacy, they offer solutions beyond the limitations of conventional programmes.

This study has implications in three aspects. First, going by arguments enunciated in this paper, it is shown that the Qurʾanic text is not merely an object of historical or literary study but a living therapeutic resource that is capable of addressing contemporary crises. Second, by recognising the profound effects on the heart's capacity for truth and beauty, the study offers an alternative epistemology which challenge the reduction of media consumption to cognitive processing or economic exchange. Lastly, it asserts that even in a world dominated by secular, commercialised frameworks, the non-Western, spiritually grounded approaches can be applied to emotional and social healing.

The cardiac hermeneutics elaborated here also invites interfaith dialogue. The heart, as a category of perception, ethics, and spiritual transformation, is not exclusive to Islam. For instance, Christian theology speaks of the *cardia* as the seat of *metanoia* while Jewish mysticism regards the *lev* as the dwelling place of divine wisdom. Buddhist psychology also considers the *citta* as the mind-heart which requires purification. In the Hindu philosophy, the *hṛdaya* is recognized as the centre of consciousness and devotion. The culmination of these is encapsulated in the Qurʾanic model of *ḥatm al-qulūb* through *tazkiyah* as the healing of human consciousness in an age of technological distortion. It is hoped that collaborative inquiry across these traditions would yield richer, more robust frameworks for digital ethics than any single tradition can provide alone. Finally, *Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt* reminds us that the health of our heart is shaped by how we speak, listen, verify, and judge. And in an age of algorithmic affect, the healing of the heart is not merely a personal spiritual project but a political and ethical imperative.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Akbar S. *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Ahmed, Akbar S. *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

Ahmed, Akbar S. *Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010.

Ahmed, Akbar S. *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Ahmed, Akbar S. "Postmodernist Perceptions of Islam: Observing the Observer." *Asian Survey* 31, no. 3 (1991): 213–31.

Ahmed, Akbar S. "Postmodernist Visions of Islam: The Viewer of the Viewer." *Asian Survey* 31, no. 3 (1991): 213–31.

Ahmed, Akbar S., and Hastings Donnan, eds. *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Akhtar, Shabbir. *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Gellner, Ernest. *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Sardar, Ziauddin. *The A to Z of Postmodern Life: Essays on Global Culture in the Noughties*. London: Vision, 2002.

Sardar, Ziauddin. *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 1998.

Sardar, Ziauddin. *A Ziauddin Sardar Reader: Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures*. Edited by Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell. London: Pluto Press, 2003.

Schwartz, Benjamin I. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Sharafuddin, Mohammed. "Islam and Postmodernism: Akbar Ahmed's Vision of Islamic Adventism." *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* 4, no. 6 (1995): 101–8.

Turner, Bryan S. Review of *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*, by Akbar S. Ahmed. *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 4 (1993): 897–902.

Zhuangzi [Chuang Tzu]. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Translated by Burton Watson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.